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RUFUS DAVIS ALDERSON
(1858-1932)

REID MORAN

The name of R. D. Alderson has been known to botanists both from his large collections in San Diego County, California, and from the writings of E. L. Greene, who based several species on these collections and named for Alderson a phacelia, a helianthemum, and a rose. Yet to present-day botanists, Alderson is no more than a name.

Rufus Davis Alderson was born in Alderson, [now West] Virginia, November 2, 1858, the younger son of Rufus Davis Alderson and Hester Ann Ammen Alderson. After teaching for three years in West Virginia, he attended the National Normal School, in Lebanon, Ohio, receiving a bachelor of science degree in August 1882. His subjects included botany, zoology, natural philosophy, physiology, herbarium, and astronomy. After two more years of teaching, he was from 1884 to 1887 the proprietor and editor of the *Alderson Statesman*. The word "PRINTERY" on his door struck the fancy of a fellow editor, who, about 1885, wrote in the Pomeroy, Ohio, *Democrat*:



FIG. 1. Rufus D. Alderson. "In California about 1895."

"It has taken us full thirty-five years along printer's lane to reach a *printery*. . . . We have seen binderys, bakerys, hennerys, piggeries, hoggeries, doggeries and groggeries, but never till auspicious fate led us into the Greenbrier Valley and up to the throne of the STATESMAN did we see a printery. In the Sancterry—we mean sanctum—was the editor. A pleasant, courteous young gentleman, who has served the State and a pleased constituency as a member of the Legislature, and who is greatly interested in all that pertains to Alderson and surrounding country. . . . The sanctum of the statesman who runs the STATESMAN serves the quadruple purpose of consultation room, library, editorial office and sleeping room. . . . Here into the bachelor boudoir come the exchanges and their editors, and here come the politicians, deacons, doctors, leaders, drivers and proprietors of enterprise to consult and move ahead."

In November 1887, apparently after a break with his childhood sweet-

heart, Emma B. Perry, Alderson came to San Diego. For a time he was foreman in a print shop, and it is thought that he did some newspaper work. On September 6, 1888, he married Minnie E. Matchin; they were divorced two years later. Between 1889 and 1897, he taught school in San Diego County, his posts including Potrero, Warners, Descanso, El Nido, Glencoe, Santa Ysabel, Spring Hill, and Bloomdale. His salary was \$60 to \$70 per month, and his contracts varied from half a month to eight months, one reading "length of term subject to amount of money available." From 1891 to 1895, most of his teaching was at Santa Ysabel, about 35 miles northeast of San Diego. During this time, he rented a small ranch at nearby Witch Creek, whose name appears on so many of his herbarium labels. In 1892 he returned to West Virginia to marry Emma Perry on August 8, leaving with her immediately for California again. In 1897 he was listed as living in Del Mar. That year, in rather frail health, he returned to West Virginia to live. Advised by his doctor to work outdoors, he took up cattle breeding and dairy farming and during the next 28 years built up a high-producing herd of Jersey cattle. He died at Lewisburg, West Virginia, May 11, 1932.

Alderson's daughter, Mrs. Ira D. Humphreys, remembers him as self-disciplined and a perfectionist, with an inquisitive mind, broad interests, and an exceptional memory, a man who worked long hours, never took a vacation, and while indoors always had a book in his hand. He read aloud to his family from history and literature.

At the age of fifteen, Alderson was already identifying native plants, as shown by notes and dates in his worn copy of Wood's "American Botanist and Florist," edition of 1874. It is not known how much he collected before leaving West Virginia, but after his return apparently his botany was mostly of a more practical sort; and seemingly few specimens of his from West Virginia have found their way into public herbaria. Millspaugh (1913:11) listed "R. W. Alderson" among those collectors a few of whose specimens were in the herbarium of Professor Sheldon, now in the herbarium of West Virginia University. Apparently the "D" of Alderson's signature was misread for "W": according to a letter from Weldon Boone, this "D" was sometimes open and could be so misread.

In San Diego County, Alderson collected plants at least from 1891 to 1896 but apparently most actively in 1893 and 1894. He also collected some insects and mollusks. Some details of his botany come from eight letters, now in the archives of the University of Notre Dame, written between April 16, 1893, and March 27, 1895, mostly at Witch Creek, from Alderson to Professor E. L. Greene at the University of California. Greene's letters have not been found. Alderson first wrote to Greene at the suggestion of H. W. Henshaw of the U.S. Biological Survey, who was visiting naturalist Frank Stephens, Alderson's neighbor at Witch Creek.¹

¹ Concerning the life of Frank Stephens, see Stephens 1918 and Huey 1938.

Alderson introduced himself to Greene as a student and teacher of botany and inquired about Greene's monograph on oaks, very highly recommended by Henshaw, and about other publications to help him identify plants. He later thanked Greene for a copy of Greene's "Manual of the Botany of the Region of San Francisco Bay," saying that for use in the schools it was much better than Rattan's "A Popular California Flora," then in use.

In October 1893, Alderson sent a large shipment of specimens to Greene for identification, saying that he had collected between 500 and 600 species that season. Many of these were from about Witch Creek; but he had also made two collecting trips over the Cuyamaca Mountains to Campo and thence to San Diego, one early in May, the other in late fall. In April 1894, he wrote that he was collecting again and wanted to make a clean sweep, taking everything. This year, with Greene in Europe, he had some plants determined by Samuel B. Parish of San Bernardino, a keen student of the flora of southern California.² Though it was a dry year and collecting relatively poor, the next February he shipped Greene 328 specimens with labels and eight more for which he did not know the names.

In April 1894, Alderson inquired of Greene as to possible purchasers of plant specimens to help defray cash expenditures in collecting. And in January 1895, he wrote that he preferred to sell to Greene rather than to exchange, for he had been getting many plants from other parts of the state by exchange and had not the room to store them.

There is no record that Alderson was associated with the San Diego Society of Natural History, but it appears that he was acquainted at least with T. S. Brandege³ and therefore probably with the other botanists of San Diego. In February 1895, Alderson wrote Greene that he hoped to visit the Colorado Desert with a party of naturalists and a florist. Labels for that year show that he was at Palmetto Springs on the Colorado Desert on the last day of March, that Brandege was there on the first of April, and that Frank Stephens was at Vallecitos, about 10 miles to the northwest, on the first and third of April. We may probably assume that they all got together.

When Alderson went East, at least a good part of his herbarium went with him. Though much of it has since been lost, a remnant of some 275 specimens has recently been given by his daughter to the San Diego Museum of Natural History, where there were already about 100 of his specimens received with the herbarium of Mary Snyder. Many of the specimens sent to Greene apparently are still in the herbarium of the University of California at Berkeley, though the types, at least, went with Greene to the University of Notre Dame. There is a large representa-

² Concerning the life of S. B. Parish, see Jepson 1932.

³ Concerning the life of T. S. Brandege, see Setchell 1926.

tion in the Dudley Herbarium, at Stanford University, from the Parish herbarium; but to judge from the specimens cited by Wiggins (1929), the set is far from complete. Other specimens are at Harvard University, the Missouri Botanical Garden, the University of Michigan, the United States National Herbarium, and probably various other institutions.

Alderson sent his specimens to Greene under numbers, though Greene did not cite these numbers and apparently they were not always kept on the labels. Many of Alderson's specimens in the Dudley Herbarium are numbered, not chronologically, perhaps in the same series; others are unnumbered. When he added printed labels to his own herbarium sometime after the collecting season of 1894—the last season represented in what I have seen of this herbarium—Alderson renumbered his specimens to beyond 12,400. The new numbers are written on the labels where they might be taken for field numbers, not only on his own specimens but also on many collected by S. B. Parish and by Frank Stephens. Besides the new numbers, specimens in his own herbarium sometimes also bear numbers corresponding to those on his specimens in the Dudley Herbarium, mostly penciled on the sheets, probably before the labels were added. Specimens from the herbarium of Mary Snyder and probably others sent out in exchange, bear his new herbarium numbers. Specimens he collected in 1895 and 1896 have numbers in the 900's to 1200's, apparently in continuation of the original series; but again, others are unnumbered.

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